JFK files: CIA covered its tracks

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WASHINGTON—Stamped "secret" for more than 30 years, the yellowed documents on the Kennedy assassination tell a story of a CIA scrambling to protect its sources—and its reputation.

The nation's leading spy agency had an extensive dossier on Lee Harvey Oswald. Almost from the moment the shots rang out killing John F. Kennedy, the damage control began.

"When the name of Lee Oswald was heard, the effect was electric," one analyst wrote, recounting the atmosphere in CIA stations on Nov. 22, 1963.

In the CIA's possession was information covering Oswald's defection to the Soviet Union in 1959, his return to the United States in 1961 with a Russian wife, and his trip to Mexico City seven weeks before the assassination.

In the months that followed, the agency was under internal pressure to explain why it hadn't warned the FBI about Oswald.

"We do not participate in the actual work of protecting the president or planning his trips within the U.S.A," one CIA report stated.

But as time wore on, the agency became concerned over a new problem—theories that it conspired to kill the president, according to a review of documents at the National Archives.

One lengthy cable from CIA headquarters—entitled "PSYCH"—instructed chiefs of its foreign stations on ways to counter the burgeoning conspiracy theories.

"Conspiracy theories frequently have thrown suspicion on our organization, for example by falsely alleging that Lee Harvey Oswald worked for us. The aim of this dispatch is to provide material for countering and discrediting the claims," the cable said.

A memo dated March 23, 1964, to Richard Helms, then the CIA's deputy director for plans, recounts a meeting at the home of Allen Dulles, former CIA director and then a member of the Warren Commission.

"AWD [Dulles] showed me a letter he had received from [Lee] Rankin [Warren Commission's chief counsel] expressing the desire to reach a modus vivendi in order to allay the story of CIA's possible sponsorship of Oswald's activity," the memo states. "The point of the communication to AWD was to suggest that he serve as CIA file reviewer for the commission."

The memo says Dulles declined but offered to provide a statement that he had no knowledge of Oswald prior to the assassination.

One photograph, familiar to assassination buffs, generated a tremendous flow of letters and cables. It showed a heavyset man leaving the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City on Oct. 1, 1963.

What concerned the CIA was not the unidentified man but the wrought-iron fence in the background. Because Soviets would identify it as their embassy, the CIA was concerned that its practice of photographing visitors there would be compromised.